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SUBJECT: VATICAN: MEDIA REACT TO PRESIDENT'S RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
COMMENTS IN CHINA

REF: A) VATICAN 512, B) BEIJI NG 17460, C) TAIPEI 3796

CLASSIFIED BY: Fleur Cowan, Political Officer, POL, STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (U) President Bush's call for increased religious freedom, and particularly "the need for [China] to invite leaders from the Vatican to come and discuss religious freedoms" was widely covered in Italian and Vatican-based news media. In a press release supporting President Bush's statements, the Ambassador emphasized that "China has a great opportunity, following the President's visit, to become more open to the Holy See, and to work towards greater freedoms for its Catholic citizens, and indeed for those of all faiths."

¶2. (SBU) Some observers noted the critical coverage by Italian newspaper, La Stampa, which reported an anonymous Vatican source stating that "for us it would have been better if it had never come along...The Chinese authorities will certainly not grant us greater religious freedom on the basis that Bush was the one who asked for it." Other newspapers, however, reported positively on the issue. In fact, the official Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, ran a front-page story with the headline: "Bush defends Religious Freedom in Beijing." The Italian bishops conference newspaper, Avvenire, published an editorial titled "He may not have attracted a huge audience, but at least Bush sang," in which the author lauded the President's efforts to draw Chinese and international attention to the religious freedom issue.

¶3. (C) Comment: Post sees no evidence of Vatican disapproval of U.S. involvement in religious freedom issues in China. In repeated conversations with Vatican interlocutors, Holy See officials have thus far been supportive of U.S. efforts, and at times have pressed for more action. The La Stampa article is more likely a case of left-leaning paper finding an anonymous Vatican voice anxious to criticize the U.S. and running with it.
End Comment.

¶4. (U) Begin text of statement by the Ambassador:

Monday, November 21

This weekend in Beijing President Bush reaffirmed our country's strong belief that the People's Republic of China must pursue greater political and religious freedom for its citizens.

As the United States Ambassador to the Holy See, I intend to make it a priority to support the Holy See on this issue. China has a great opportunity, following the President's visit, to become more open to the Holy See, and to work towards greater freedoms for its Catholic citizens, and indeed for those of all faiths.

The relationship between the Holy See and the United States is strong, and we will continue to work together to promote political and religious freedom in the world. As President Bush noted this weekend, "a healthy society is a society that welcomes all faiths and gives people a chance to express themselves through worship with the Almighty."

End Text.
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